

Chau Was a Model Ally of U.S. Who Ran Afoul of Thieu Regime

Special to The New York Times

VAN NUYS, Calif. — Tran Ngoc Chau was the good Vietnamese. In a South Vietnam where every American official had to admit, however reluctantly and privately, that most of the Vietnamese officials with whom he dealt were corrupt, incompetent, or both, Mr. Chau was an exception.

The son of an upper-class family, he had the equally rare distinction for a South Vietnamese of having fought the French for four years with Ho Chi Minh's Viet Minh and then coming over to the anti-Communist side to serve as an army officer and provincial governor. He won a seat in the National Assembly in 1967 in one of the few unrigged contests in the history of the country.

In the early and mid-1960's the Central Intelligence Agency regarded his pacification programs as models and financed and imitated them. The American Embassy found his political information valuable. That a man like Mr. Chau would fight on the Saigon side helped to justify the war for those Americans who knew him. Then, in 1968, he decided that his country had suffered enough and that it was time to make peace.

Mr. Chau says he was convinced in 1968 that the Communists were so weakened by losses in their surprise offensive at Tet, the Lunar New Year holiday, that the Buddhists and other religious sects in the south could band together and hold their own after a cease-fire, without the presence of the United States Army. He used his brother, a senior Communist intelligence officer, as an intermediary with Hanoi to try to set himself up as the man who could negotiate a peace.

Jailed by Friend Named Thieu

Ambassador Ellsworth Bunker denounced Mr. Chau as a Communist agent to other Vietnamese politicians in an outburst overheard by another American, but which Mr. Bunker says he does not remember. One of Mr. Chau's former friends, Nguyen Van Thieu, the last of the American-backed strongmen in Saigon, ordered him thrown into jail in February 1970 for four and a half years.

The C.I.A. station chief declined ap-



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Tran Ngoc Chau

peals from Mr. Chau's American friends to save him. Suspicious of Mr. Chau's motives because of his contacts with his brother, the C.I.A. ruled that its collaboration with him had created no obligations.

On April 29, 1975, when the American presence in Vietnam had dwindled to a few landing pads and a string of helicopters, the United States abandoned Mr. Chau and many other Vietnamese to what Richard M. Nixon and other Presidents had predicted for decades would be a "bloody reign of terror."

In the middle of the night six weeks after their triumph, the Communists arrested Mr. Chau. There was no blood-bath, but he was kept in a "re-education camp" and prisons for two years and 20 days before being released under surveillance.

He escaped from Ho Chi Minh City, the new name for Saigon, last February, buying places for himself and his family on a Chinese refugee boat and, after being marooned on an Indonesian island for months, reached California in November.